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The Mystery of the Black

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A saga of hotshot international espionage from the great days of Ramparts.

In New Orleans, as you probably know, the D.A. is called the "Jolly Green Giant." Jim Garrison is tall enough, and normally jolly enough, and, in his dealings with a cheating government and an ambush-primed press in the months and years after the Kennedy assassination, he showed himself green enough to earn the title, whatever the significance of the original nickname.

Most everyone also knows, in some snickering fashionable way, what happened to the District Attorney and his assassination investigation. In New York terms, he closed opening night. But somewhere back in the primordial ooze of the Garrison investigation there lingers a story that has never been told before. It is not an assassination story, it is primarily a mystery story, and it is not even a story about Garrison himself, although his interests at the time spurred on the events. There have been good reasons for the long silence of the participants, or victims, as the telling places certain people where they perhaps should not have been, and involves the violation, or alleged violation, of several laws of the land, among them those proscribing the unauthorized dealings by private citizens with the governments of unfriendly foreign powers. By now, though, Richard Nixon the Elder has left pecker tracks all over those previously clear ground rules, and one no longer knows if one is dealing with an old enemy or a new friend until one picks up the morning paper. So I will be indiscreet.

As the story quickly becomes caught up in the whirlpools and rapids of international intrigue, I will begin, as simply as possible, at the beginning--which, as is the case in many mysteries, was a conversation over a friendly drink about a proposition of dubious legality.

In the New Orleans Summer of 1968, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover

then working for *Ramparts* magazine, was chewing the conspiracy fat with Jim Garrison and enjoying a Southern bourbon without benefit of mint. Turner suggested that it would be nice to know what the Russians knew about the murder of John F. Kennedy. Assuming that they didn't do it, they doubtless had a pretty good idea who did. The thought of the K.G.B.'s bulging files on the C.I.A. lit Garrison up.

"Even if they'd cooperate," Turner said, "we could never make the approach from the D.A.'s office. The wolves out there would never stop howling if they caught us asking the time of day of the K.G.B." Garrison frowned.

Never mind that, said Turner. *Ramparts* would make the Russians an offer they couldn't refuse. I was the editor at *Ramparts* in those days, so what happened after that inevitably involved me.

It was a week later. In hot pursuit of his goal, Turner was having coffee in a San Francisco restaurant with a young man who had no name. He was the shady side of thirty-five, tall, tanned, sandy-haired, with high raw cheekbones and polished turquoise eyes. He was not a professional mystery man, although he was mysterious about his profession, and it would be as accurate to say he had several names as none, because names to him were as paper plates, to be used and then discarded. His primary employment, in the year and a half that *Ramparts* had known him, was that of a contract combat pilot for the C.I.A. He flew a Douglas B-26 out of Miami on itinerant bombing raids against the Cuban coastline. His targets were usually pedestrian objects such as oil tanks, although once he made a pass over a Russian-built radar installation. He had also flown aerial reconnaissance missions over Cuba out of Central and South American airfields.

other places in the world at the drop of a dollar. His disillusion with the C.I.A. began when he worked for them in the Congo. "You can rescue nuns," the Agency had told him. He found himself shooting up supply boats instead. But he kept flying, partly for the money, which was good, partly because he was hooked on adventure, and the C.I.A. was the big Connection.

It is testimony to the perverseness of his world that--although he came to see himself as working for the bad guys, an employment he was loath to give up because he enjoyed the means if not the end--his dangerous compulsion to simultaneously do something for the good guys was limited by his inability to find any. He had once tried an undercover assignment for the federal nares, but their bumbling ways nearly got him killed. Given the paucity of angels, he latched onto *Ramparts* as a reasonable alternative to evil and a place where double agents were granted instant status as war heroes. As often as he was in the office, and visiting our homes, there remained a restive quality about him, a separateness, as if he were lonely out there in the cold and wanted companionship, yet didn't want to come all the way in.

We called him Jim Rose. At least that was the name by which he was known to everyone on the magazine, including one of the secretaries with whom he took up housekeeping between derrings-do. But he had a name for every day of the week. He was Jack Carter when he worked in Miami, until later he became too hot and decided to "kill off" Carter by simulating a plane crash at sea, thus discouraging the spoilsports in the F.A.A. from inquiring further into the checkered history of Carter's flight plans. He had several newspaper clippings reporting his own death, which he would exhibit with the eager shyness of someone showing you an